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T H E

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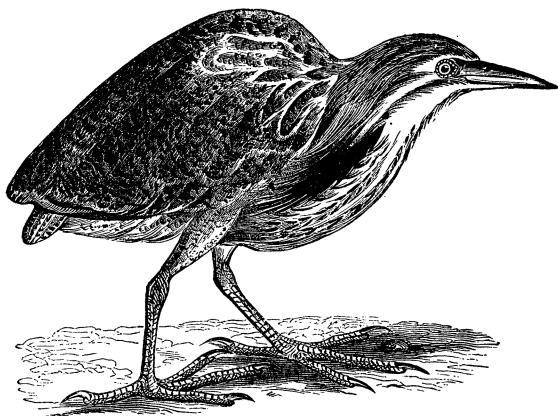
BITTERNS.

BY WILLIAM E. ENDICOTT.



MANY persons are repelled by scientific nomenclature. Let not such, however, turn away from this article when I say that the name of the genus I write of is *Botaurus*, for the English term "bittern" is the same word, only in a dif-

Fig. 36.*



ferent shape, and comes from the Latin *Botaurus* (*i. e.*, *boatus taurinus*), through the French *butor*, or Spanish *bitor*. *Botaurus*, *butor*, *bitor* or *bittern*, it is all one, and means "bull-voiced." The popular local names the bird has re-

* *Botaurus lentiginos* Stephens; from Tenney's Zoölogy.

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ceived are nearly all from the same characteristic : these are Stake-driver, applied to our own bird, and Mire-drum, Bull of the Bog, Butter-bump and Bog-blutter (*i. e.*, bleater), applied to the European species.

Australia is a land of anomalies ; a kingfisher lives there which avoids the water, dwells in arid wastes, living on lizards and snakes, and has his home in a tree ; and possibly some unknown species of bittern may belong there which flutters about the upland fields and lives on seeds, and will be held in high repute as a warbler when he shall, hereafter, be found, and will be kept in a gilded cage with a cuttle-fish bone. That would indeed be a sight worth going half-way around the world to see. I dare prophesy, however, that that island's vast unknown interior will produce no such wonder, but that all unknown bitterns will be found to agree in character with the known. What that character is, how it differs from our supposed songster, let us now consider.

The prophets use its name in foretelling desolation. Says Isaiah, of Babylon, "I will make it a possession for the bittern ;" and Zephaniah says of Ninevah, "The cormorant and the bittern shall lodge in the upper lintels of it." Hear also what Mudie, who was not a prophet, says of the European species. "It hears not the whistle of the ploughman nor the sound of the mattock ; and the tinkle of the sheep bell or the lowing of the ox (although the latter bears so much resemblance to its hollow and dismal voice that it has given foundation for the name) is a signal for it to be gone. Places which scatter blight and mildew over every herb more delicate than a sedge ; which are the pasture of those loathsome things which wriggle in the ooze, or crawl and swim in the putrid and mantling waters ; places which shed murrain over the quadrupeds, or chills which eat the flesh off their bones ; places from which even the raven, lover of disease and battener upon all that expires miserably and exhausted, keeps aloof (for 'the reek o' the rotten fen' is loathsome even to him), are the chosen habitation, the only loved home of the

bittern. He is a bird of the confines, beyond which we can imagine nothing but utter ruin."

This picture is, I think, somewhat overdrawn; moreover, no naturalist ought to speak of the waste places of Nature in that disapproving way. We might pardon a mere collector for writing so of bogs and wilds, he knows no better; to him, a natural history store, where he may *buy* his eggs, his shells, his bird-skins, or his sea-mosses, is preferable to the swamps he must struggle through, the thickets he must thread, the plains he must traverse, and the sandy or muddy sea-beaches he must frequent if he would be a *student* of Nature. Dry feet, untired limbs, clothes and flesh untorn by briar and bramble, are not for the naturalist at all hours, nor should he complain; a new plant, a rare mollusk, a bird till now unseen, an egg till now unknown, repay such trials as these; and, if he find no such prize, his tramp, like virtue, is its own reward. That there is something about the fowl, of which Mudie thus speaks, that appeals strongly to the imagination is not to be denied; but the bird is, nevertheless, a reputable bird, although he is the one which ignorant peasants in the old countries know by the name of "night raven," believing that disaster or death must needs follow when they have heard his voice booming over the fens on a warm cloudy night, as they staggered their drunken way home from the ale-house. Terrible as the voice sounds to their dull senses, it is sweetest music to the bittern's mate, sitting among the grasses below him, or with him circling the sky just under the cloud.

On this side of the Atlantic we have no superstitious fear of the fowl, and do not think the swamps accursed by his presence. He is a lovely bird in unprejudiced, discriminating eyes; he has no gaudy colors, but his blacks, his browns and yellows, of many shades, all of them pleasing, are so blended as to produce a beautiful, harmonious effect. He loves waste places, for they furnish him safety and food; safety, because his enemy, man, is fond of a dry foot; and

food, for frogs and snails and snakes and mice, all prime delicacies with our hermit, abound there, and, with an occasional minnow, supply all his wants. And yet his safety is not perfect, for the prying naturalist, for whom mud and water have no terrors, sometimes comes across his home and family; and the wanton gunner, starting him up from his fishing and frogging, never spares him, but shoots him at sight; and what man, with an arm and a leg broken and body pierced with a dozen bullets will make as good a fight as does our bird when the destroyer goes to pick him up? As long as life is in his wrangled body, he never ceases to lunge and thrust at his murderer's eyes with his spear-like bill, scorning to yield to either pain or fear.

He comes to us from Mexico, Central America, and the West Indies (the European species winters in Africa) early in the spring (I bought one, freshly killed, in the latter part of March, 1868, though that was very early indeed), and probably takes up his abode in the same swamp which last year he frequented. The "tinkle of the sheep bell" does not banish the bold bird; he and his mate live in their five or ten acres the whole summer through, although just outside their bushy quagmire the white-shirted haymakers may whet their scythes and shout to their horses, and the locomotive with his thundering train may go tearing by almost every hour in the day. It seems that the raven avoids the bittern's domains, because he don't like the "reek o' the rotten fen." Very well, let him stay away if he likes, the beautiful yellow-throats and swamp-sparrows, and, if there is a rotten stump, the chickadees, make his place good and more than good. With their company and with surroundings of purple-blossomed *Kalmia*, glossy-leaved *Smilax* and pink *Calopogon*, quiet cedars, nodding sedges, and rustling grasses, Old Sooty's absence will be little mourned.

Some speak of finding the bittern breeding in colonies in trees. Good observers say so, and I believe them; but I think that all such cases are owing to accidental circum-

stances, such as the inundation of their marshes. Certain it is that I have never found them so associated. "Le butor," says M. Holandre, "est très sauvage, farouche, solitaire." One tiger's den to a jungle, one eyry to a mountain, and one pair of bitterns to a bog seems to be the rule.

In the place where I have found them, there is retired feeding ground for a thousand, dense cedar swamps extensive enough for as many nests if they only chose to congregate, like their social cousins, the herons; and yet two by two they live, their next neighbors nobody knows how far away,—not in the same swamp at any rate; and on the ground, the bare ground, they lay their four or five eggs, among low laurel, tufts of grass, or, as in the case of the first nest I ever found, at the foot of a swamp huckleberry (from which the four callow young, unable yet to stand, tried to drive me away by repeated tumbling charges, menacing me by clumping their soft mandibles, and by sending angry hisses from their wide-yawning, yellow throats).

I have been surprised to find the general uncertainty which pervades ornithological works, upon the subject of the color of the bittern's eggs. These really are of a dark drab color in the case of our own bird as well as of the European; in fact I could find no distinguishing marks between these two species when examining a large number of both, which I was enabled to do by the kindness of Mr. Samuels. I have not been able to find any variation in the color of those of our species, though I have inspected eggs from all parts of the Union. Hear now what a few of the authorities say: Audubon declares that he never found the bittern's nest, nor, apparently, did he ever see its eggs, for he says nothing of them. Nuttall writes, "the bittern *is said* to lay cinereous green eggs." Wilson, "they breed at Hudson's Bay in swamps, and lay four cinereous green eggs, *we are informed*." Richardson, "they lay, *according to Mr. Hutchins*, four eggs of a cinereous green color." Latham, "breeds at Hudson's Bay, and lays four cinereous

green eggs." Peabody, "eggs of a green color." Thompson, "six eggs, of a dark, bluish-brown, clay color." Finding the venerated authorities determined that the eggs should have green on them of some shade or other, I made a fresh examination, thinking I might have been mistaken. I studied them long and carefully in every light, and gave them full consideration, but it was all in vain. I did once think I had detected a glancing greenish reflection, but found the color came from a window blind. I have stated that the eggs of the American and the European species are just alike. Let us see what European authors say: Selby says, pale green; Bewick, greenish white; Fleming, olive green; a writer for the London Tract Society, pale greenish-ash; Mudie, greenish brown; Albin, whitish, inclining to ashy or green; Latham, pale ash-green; Goodrich, pale green; M. Holandre, *blanc-verdâtre*; Nauman and Buhle give a figure much too dark. It is hard to be obliged to say of so many well known men that their statements are unreliable; but seeing is believing, and the truth is the truth, and the color is as I have said. Mr. Samuels gives the true state of the case with regard to our bird, and Yarrell in regard to the European species, and Hewitson and Atkinson, the former of whom borrowed the specimen he figures from Mr. Yarrell, both give accurately colored plates. When writers will say such things of the European kind, we need not be surprised, however incredulous, when Latham tells us that a Cayenne species lays "round whitish eggs, spotted with green." Besides all these errors, the author of the article "Bittern," in the "New American Cyclopædia," says that the bird "builds in trees, like the herons, ordinarily rearing two young," a statement about as incorrect as it could be. Mudie speaks as follows of the European bittern's voice: "Anon a burst of savage laughter breaks upon you, gratingly loud, and so unwonted and odd that it sounds as if the voices of a bull and a horse were combined; the former breaking down his bellow to suit the neigh of the latter in mocking you from

the sky." "When the bittern booms and bleats overhead one certainly feels as if the earth were shaking." Goldsmith's description of the bittern's voice is one of his most pleasing passages. Many of the poets speak of the bird's strange voice, and even in the time of Thompson (Thompson of the Seasons) it was thought that the bill was thrust into the mud in making it. Chaucer speaks as follows in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* :

"And as a bitore bumleth in the mire,
She laid hire mouth into the water down,
Bewray me not, thou water, with thy soun',
Quod she, 'to the I tell it, and no mo
Min husbond hath long asses eres two.'"

Another notion was that the bill was put inside a reed to increase the sound; the truth is, of course, that the bird uses no means to produce its bellow but its own organs of voice. Our own bittern has no such roar, but, as its name in most parts of the country denotes, makes a noise very much like driving a stake with an axe. It has also a hollow croak at the moment of alarm.

These remarks apply to the American and European species; the geographical range of the former is from latitude 60° north, to Central America and the West Indies, having never been found, I believe, south of latitude 10° north. It is of rare occurrence west of the Rocky Mountains, though not uncommon in other parts of the United States. Many specimens of this bird have been shot in the British Isles, particularly in Ireland. The first recorded capture was in Devonshire, England, in October, 1804; the prize was by some regarded as a new species. All such specimens have been killed in the fall, so that there can be no doubt that they were blown out to sea in their autumnal migration.

The European species has a wider range. Selby says it is confined to Europe, but such is not the case; it occurs, though rarely, in Norway, Russia and Siberia, up to latitude 65° north, and is found breeding at the Cape of Good Hope, in latitude 35° south. In the other direction it extends from

the Atlantic to the River Lena, in Siberia, and is found, though sparingly, in Hindostan. It is very rare in the British Islands, owing, probably, to drainage of bogs; so rare in fact, that some naturalists have thought it worth their while to give date and place of the killing of all specimens they have seen. In England it is said to breed only in Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. In old times the bittern was held in high esteem for the sport it afforded when pursued by trained falcons. Both birds would mount in spirals, oftentimes out of sight; the bittern straining every nerve to keep above the hawk, the hawk doing his best to rise above the bittern so as to make the fatal pounce. The bittern, being of weaker flight, rarely escaped, but often in his death involved his enemy's; for as the cruel falcon came down with rushing wings, exulting in his fierce soul, the bittern, in his dire extremity, thrusting up his sharp beak, empaled the triumphant savage, and both came tumbling from the clouds together, striking the earth with a thump which drove the last breath from both. A lesson to tyrants not to push the weak to despair.

On account of its furnishing such excellent sport to the humane of former times, rigorous laws for its protection were passed in the reign of Henry VIII, and of Edward VI, which imposed a fine of eight pence and a year's imprisonment for every egg taken or destroyed. There was something like protection. The long hind claw was a most excellent toothpick, for, besides its functions as such, it had, if the wisdom of our ancestors was infallible, the highly meritorious property of preserving the teeth from decay. It appears, moreover, that the fowl had then the power of displaying a brilliant light from the centre of its breast, which attracted fish to it in great shoals, so that the satisfying of its hunger took but a small part of the night, and much time was left for other pursuits, one of the most cheerful of which was to soar above the hovel of the British ploughman or hedger or ditcher, and rouse him from his lethargic sleep

or struggling nightmare with a doleful noise, portending certain death to Hodge, or Joan, or some one else; and this prediction was always fulfilled to the letter, for in the course of the next twelve months some one was sure to die in that county or the next. The flesh of the prophet, however, was very good, provided his skin was stripped off before cooking, that it might not impart a muddy odor and taste.

Thus it will be seen that our bird was a strange compound of good and evil, besides having some magical properties which weighed on neither side; but the march of centuries, which has changed everything for good or ill has had its effect upon the bittern. He can no longer preserve our teeth, nor can he cast a murrain upon our cattle, nor even foretell somebody's death; even his magical light is gone, and he is now a quiet obscure fellow, doing man neither good nor ill, and asking only to be let alone. As to the bitterns of less civilized countries, their manners and customs have never been described at much length, but they appear not to differ much from the American and European species, except that the lineated bittern of Cayenne is said by Latham to be capable of domestication, and to be then an excellent mouser.

The bitterns are all much mottled in plumage, and may be divided by this mottling into three groups, viz.: First, The Rayed Bitterns, in which the mottling takes the form of longitudinal streaks, especially on the breast, in which group are the *Botaurus stellaris* (*i. e.*, the starry) of Europe and Africa; *B. lentiginosus* (*i. e.*, the freckled) of North America, and *B. pœciloptila* (variegated feather) of Australia; this last is now thought to be identical with *B. Australis*. Second, the Spotted Bitterns, such as *Tigrisoma tigrina* (tiger-bodied, tiger-like) of Cayenne, and the Javan *B. limnophilax* (pool-guard, a name which reminds one of Hood's lines:

"The moping heron, motionless and stiff,
That on a stone, as silently and stilly,
Stands, an apparent sentinel, as if
To guard the water-lily").

Third, the Pencilled Bitterns, such as *Tigrisoma melanolopha* (black necked) of Ceylon and Burmah, and probably of the Malay peninsula; *Zebrilus undulatus* (wavy) of Guiana, and *Tig. Braziliensis*, whose name denotes its habitat. This last is the most beautiful of the family, its back being black, thickly and delicately pencilled with white and rufous; primaries, dark slate; crown, clear bright, and nape clear dark rufous. In front alone does the bird resemble our own, and even there the colors are brighter and more clearly defined.

No part of ornithological research is more fascinating than the study of feathers; the more we examine them the more we must be lost in admiration of their beauty. I have never seen more beautiful feathers than those of the American Bittern. The ones I am at present examining, though they have been plucked from the bird more than a year, retain a beautiful gloss, hardly inferior to that they wore in life. Both webs of the primaries, and the anterior one of the secondaries, have a lovely bloom of a most delicate ashy blue. There is a very regular gradation in texture, coloration, position of the shaft in the vane, and in most particulars of shape, from the first primary to the last tertial, the former being very dense, strong, of a clear unflecked slaty blue, with but one or two mere hairs of down; end acutely angled, with the shaft very near the anterior edge; the latter very loose in texture, so weak that a mere touch serves to tear its fibres apart; in color slaty brown, most finely marked with wavy lines of rusty brown, and not only very downy three-fourths of the distance to the tip, but furnished with a very soft accessory plume, three inches long and two wide: the tip widely rounded, and the shaft at the very centre. Besides these differences, there is also observable a certain indefinite youthfulness, if I may so express it, of color, which distinguishes the tertials from the secondaries; and the secondaries again have an immature, diffident appearance of texture, as compared with the primaries. No

words can express the extreme delicacy and downy softness of some of the body feathers, particularly those of the lower part of the breast, one of which now before me measures $3\frac{3}{12}$ inches in length, and $3\frac{7}{12}$ in breadth. Our species, like the European, has a black-lead colored patch on the sides of its neck, the feathers of which are very unlike common ones, being little more than shafts with parallel hairs arranged along their sides.

I have given no close descriptions of the various species, because, though such may serve to identify a bird in the hand, they seldom give any vivid idea of an unseen one in the bush. As to size I may remark that *B. Braziliensis* is the largest species, and *Zebrius undulatus* the smallest, standing less than half as high as our bird.

There is a series of small waders found, one or more species in every country, called "small bittern," "least bittern," etc., which I leave out, because I believe they are much nearer the herons, for the following reasons: The bitterns are all thickly mottled; the herons are colored in spaces of clear color,—so are most of the "little bitterns." The characteristic color of the bitterns is brown of different shades; of the herons, different shades of ash,—as is the case with most of the "little bitterns." The bittern's feathers stand out so that the bird, particularly about the neck, looks thick and even clumsy; the heron's feathers are so arranged as to give an elegant look to the wearer of them,—so are the "little bittern's." The bittern's egg is of the color I have said; the heron's is of a clear, light green,—so is the "little bittern's." In fact the night-herons bear a much greater resemblance to the bitterns than do the small series we have been speaking of. In conclusion, I would say that I have endeavored to make this article correct throughout, but that it is very likely that it has its errors and omissions. I shall be glad to have the former corrected, and the latter supplied.